

The Tale
of the
Wife of
Bath

By God, he smoot me ones, on the lyst,
for that I rente out of his book a leef,
That of the strook myn ere wax al deaf.
Stibourne I was as is a leonesse,
And of my tonge a verray jangleresse;
And walke I wolde, as I had doon biforn,
from hous to hous, although he had it sworn;
for which he often tymes wolde preche,
And me of olde Romayn geestes teche;
How he, Symplicius Gallus, lefte his wyf,
And hire forsok for terme of al his lyf,
Noght but for open/heveded he hir say
Lokynge out at his dore upon a day.
Another Romayn tolde he me by name,
That, for his wyf was at a someres game
Withouthen his wityng, he forsook hire eke.
And thanne wolde he upon his Bible seke
That ilke proverbe of Ecclesiaste,
Wher he comandeth and forbedeth faste,
Man shal nat suffre his wyf go roule aboute;
Thanne wolde he seye right thus, withouten doute:
Whoso that buyldeth his hous al of salwes,
And prieth his blynde hors over the falwes,
And suffreth his wyf to go seken halwes,
Is worthy to been hanged on the galwes.
But al for noght, I sette noght an hawe
Of his proverbes nor his olde sawe;
Ne I wolde nat of hym corrected be.
I hate hym that my vices telleth me,
And so doo mo, God woot! of us than I.
This made hym with me wood al outrelly;
I nolde noght forbere hym in no cas.
O wol I seye yow sooth, by Seint Thomas,
Why that I rente out of his book a leef,
for which he smoot me so that I was deaf.
He hadde a book that gladly, nyght and day,
for his desport he wolde rede alway.
He cleped it Valerie and Theofraste,
At whiche book he lough alwey ful faste;
And eek ther was som tyme a clerk at Rome,
A cardinal, that highte Seint Jerome,
That made a book agayn Jovinian,
In whiche book eek ther was Tertulan,
Crisippus, Trotula, and Helowys,
That was abbesse nat fer fro Parys;
And eek the Parables of Salomon,
Ovides Art, and bookes many on;
And alle thise were bounden in o volume.
And every nyght and day was his custume,
Whan he hadde leyser and vacacioun
from oother worldly occupacioun,
To reden on this book of wikked wyves.
He knew of hem mo legendes and lyves
Than been of goode wyves in the Bible,
for, trusteth wel, it is an impossible
That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,
But if it be of hooly Seintes lyves,
Ne of noon oother womman never the mo.
Who peyntede the leoun? Tel me who.
By God! if wommen hadde writen stories,
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse
Than all the mark of Adam may redresse.

The children of Mercurie and of Venus
Been in hir wirkyng ful contrarius;
Mercurie loveth wysdom and science,
And Venus loveth ryot and dispence;
And, for hire diverse disposicioun,
Ech falleth in othere exaltacioun;
And thus, God woot, Mercurie is desolat
In Pisces, wher Venus is exaltat;
Therefore no womman of no clerk is reysed;
The clerk, whan he is cold, and may noght do
Of Venus werkis worth his olde sho,
Thanne sit he down, and writ in his dotage
That wommen kan nat kepe hir mariage.
But now to purpos, why I tolde thee
That I was beten for a book, pardee.
Upon a nyght, Jankyn that was oure squire
Redde on his book, as he sat by the fire,
Of Eva first, that, for hir wikkednesse
Was al mankynde broght to wretchednesse;
for which that Jhesu Crist hymself was slayn,
That boghte us with his herte blood agayn.
Lo, here expres of womman may ye fynde,
That womman was the los of al mankynde.
The redde he me how Sampson loste his heres;
Sleepyng, his lemman kytte hem with hir sheres;
Thurgh whiche tresoun loste he bothe his eyen.
The redde he me, if that I shal nat lyen,
Of Hercules and of his Dianyre,
That caused hym to sette hymself afyre.
Nothyng forgat he the sorwe and wo
That Socrates hadde with his wyves two;
How Xantippa caste pisse upon his heed.
This sely man sat stille as he were deed;
He wiped his heed, namore dorste he seyn
But, Er that thonder stynte, comth a reyn!
Of Phasipha, that was the queene of Crete,
for shrewednesse, hym thoughte the tale swete;
fy! speke namore; it is a grisly thyng,
Of hire horrible lust and hir likyng!
Of Clitemystra, for hire lecherye
That falsly made hire housbonde for to dye;
He redde it with ful good devocioun.
He tolde me eek for what occasioun
Amphiorax at Thebes loste his lyf;
Myn housbonde hadde a legende of his wyf,
Eriphilem, that for an ouche of gold
Hath prively unto the Grekes told
Wher that hir housbonde hidde hym in a place,
for which he hadde at Thebes sory grace.
Of Lyma tolde he me, and of Lucy;
They bothe made hire housbondes for to dye;
That oon for love, that oother was for hate;
Lyma, hir housbonde, on an even late,
Empoysoned hath, for that she was his fo;
Lucia, likerous, loved hire housbonde so,
That, for he sholde alwey upon hire thynke,
She yaf hym swich a manere love/drynke
That he was deed, er it were by the morwe;
And thus algates housbondes han sorwe.
Hanne tolde he me, how oon Latumys
Compleyned unto his felawe Arrius
That in his gardyn grewed swich a tree,

On which, he seyde, how that his wyves thre
hanged herself for herte despitous.
O levee brother, quod this Arrius,
Yif me a plante of thilke blissed tree,
And in my gardyn planted it shal be.
Of latter date, of wyves hath he red,
That somme han slayn hir housbondes in hir bed,
And lette hir lechour dighte hire al the nyght;
Whan that the corps lay in the floor upright;
And somme han dryve nayles in hir brayn
Whil that they slepte, and thus they han hem
slayn.
Somme han hem yewe poyson in hire drynke;
He spak moore harm than herte may bithynke;
And therewithal, he knew of mo proverbes,
Than in this world ther growen gras or herbes.
Bet is, quod he, thyn habitacioun
Be with a leoun or a foul dragoun,
Than with a womman usynge for to chydre.
Bet is, quod he, hie in the roof abyde,
Than with an angry wyf down in the hous.
They been so wikked and contrarious,
They haten that hir housbondes loven ay.
He seyde: A womman cast hir shame away
Whan she cast of hir smok; and forther mo,
A fair womman, but she be chaast also,
Is lyk a gold rym in a sowes nose.
Who wolde wenen, or who wolde suppose,
The wo that in myn herte was, and pyne?
And whan I saugh he wolde nevere fyne
To reden on this cursed book al nyght,
Al sodenly thre leves have I plyght
Out of his book, right as he radde, and eke
I with my fest so took hym on the cheke,
That in oure fyr he fil bakward adoun;
And he up sterte as dooth a wood leoun,
And with his fest he smoot me on the heed,
That in the floor I lay as I were deed;
And whan he saugh how stille that I lay,
He was agast, and wolde han fled his way,
Til atte laste out of my swogh I breyde:
O! hastow slayn me, false theef? I seyde:
And for my land thus hastow mordred me?
Er I be deed, yet wol I kisse thee.
And neer he cam, and kneled faire adoun,
And seyde: Deere suster Alisoun!
As help me God, I shal thee nevere smyte;
That I have doon, it is thyself to wyte.
Foryeve it me, and that I thee biseke;
And yet, eftsoones, I hitte hym on the cheke,
And seyde: Theef! thus muchel am I wreke;
Now wol I dye, I may no lenger speke.
But atte laste, with muchel care and wo,

We fille accorded, by us selven two.
He yaf me al the bridel in myn hond,
To han the governance of hous and lond,
And of his tonge, and of his hond also,
And made hym brenne his book anon right tho;
And whan that I hadde geten unto me,
By maistrie, al the soveraynetee,
And that he seyde: Myn owene trewe wyf,
Do as thee lust to terme of al thy lyf,
Keep thyn honour, and keep eek myn estaat.
After that day we hadden never debaat.
God help me so, I was to hym as kynde
As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde,
And also trewe, and so was he to me.
I prey to God, that sit in magestee,
So blesse his soule, for his mercy deere.
Now wol I seye my tale, if ye wol heere.

Biholde the wordes bitwene the Somnour and
the frere.

He frere lough, whan he hadde herd
al this;
Now, dame, quod he, so have I joye
or blis,
This is a long preamble of a tale!
And whan the Somnour herde
the frere gale,
Lo! quod the Somnour, Goddes armes two!
A frere wol entremette him everemo.
Lo, goode men, a flye, and eek a frere,
Wol falle in every dyssh and eek mateere.
What spekestow of preambulacioun?
What! amble, or trotte, or pees, or go sit down;
Thou lettest oure disport in this manere.
Ye, woltow so, sire Somnour? quod the frere;
Now, by my feith! I shal, er that I go,
Telle of a somnour swich a tale or two
That alle the folk shal laughen in this place.
Now elles, frere, I bishrewe thy face!
Quod this Somnour, and I bishrewe me
But if I telle tales, two or thre,
Of freres, er I come to Sidingborne,
That I shal make thyn herte for to morne,
for wel I woot thy patience is gon.
Are hooste cride, Dees! and that anon!
And seyde: I at the womman telle hire
tale;
Ye fare as folk that dronken been of ale.
Do, dame, telle forth youre tale, and that is best.
Al redy, sire, quod she, right as yow lest;
If I have licence of this worthy frere.
Yis, dame, quod he, tel forth, and I wol heere.

Heere endeth the Wyf of Bath hir prologe.

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